

Sōseki's *Meian* Revisited: A Fresh Look at a Modern Classic

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NINE decades after Natsume Sōseki's death on December 9, 1916, and hence also nine decades after the serialization, in the *Asahi Shimbun*, of his last novel *Meian* 明暗 was broken off on December 14 of that year, twenty-two sections having remained after he collapsed on November 22, both Sōseki the author and his unfinished work are the objects of intense scrutiny that gives no sign whatsoever of abating. Every *enquête*, or *ankêto* アンケート, of the most favorite author of the Japanese reading public, places Sōseki as number one, always outranking even Mori Ōgai 森鷗外 (1862–1922) and the two Nobel laureates in literature Kawabata Yasunari 川端康成 (1899–1972) and Ōe Kenzaburō 大江健三郎 (1935–). Although *Meian* is not always similarly ranked as the most favorite Sōseki novel, it is never absent from among the three or four most admired of his novels. (Clearly *Kokoro* 心 [Heart, 1914] and *Michikusa* 道草 [Grass on the Wayside, 1915] have their ardent admirers.) But I hope I may be forgiven for considering *Meian* the finest of Sōseki's works, not only because I translated it into English but also because, having explored Sōseki's life and work, or as the French would have it, his *vie et oeuvre*, for well over half a century, I think I am well qualified to assess the relative merits of his many superb works.

With that as a preface, I wish to revisit this unfinished novel and attempt to persuade prospective readers of its sterling qualities, which seem to me to become only more remarkable with every rereading—even in translation—and here I am referring not to my own but to the excellent French translation

Clair-obscur (1989) by René de Ceccatty and Ryōji Nakamura, which I have finally finished reading.¹ My use of the verb “revisit” in the title of this essay is an obvious reference to my fairly lengthy critique appended as an “Afterword” to my English translation entitled *Light and Darkness* (London: Peter Owen, 1971).² I have written several other shorter critiques of the novel, but they were mostly set within broader essays on topics such as the hero in Sōseki’s novels or the concept of nature in Sōseki’s works. Hence it is that “Afterword” that represents my most sustained critical treatment of the novel to date and the one that I shall refer to several times as I now present my newer—and I hope wiser—assessment. As I have just stated, my translation was published in London in 1971, but I gave the date of my “Afterword” as 1967, coincidentally Sōseki’s centennial, and the place I wrote it as Tokyo, which of course was also Sōseki’s birthplace, although at the time it was, as everyone knows, called Edo. The four-year gap between the date of the “Afterword” and that of the publication represents the painful fact that I had great difficulty finding a publisher after indeed completing my translation in 1967. But, as I have reflected on that essay and as I have prepared this one, I realized that what I did in 1967 was merely to revise and expand an earlier essay written in the spring and early summer of 1960 and presented at a meeting in Tokyo to the Asiatic Society of Japan in the same year. All of this may seem tedious, but by these comments I wish to emphasize that in effect nearly a half-century has elapsed since I first evaluated this extraordinary work. The changes in the world between the mid-twentieth century and the early twenty-first are almost incalculably great, so that it should hardly be surprising that I too have changed in my views both of Sōseki and of his unfinished last novel. Nevertheless, I hasten to assert that in the most important areas I have not changed my views. For I continue to believe that no modern Japanese writer, with the possible exception of Sōseki’s exact contemporary Mori Ōgai, approaches the depth and power of his literary artistry and of his exploration of the human condition, and no Sōseki novel, even *Kōjin* 行人 (The Wayfarer, 1913), *Kokoro*, and *Michikusa*, all of which I greatly admire, approaches the

¹ Natsume Sōseki, *Clair-obscur*, trans. by René de Ceccatty and Ryōji Nakamura, Paris: Edition Rivages, 1989.

² All of the quotations from the novel are taken from this translation. Occasionally I have modified my translation slightly wherever I think it is appropriate. After each major quotation, I have placed in parentheses the number of the section (there are 188 of them, each representing one day of the novel’s serialization) where the quotation appears.

depth and power—and, most importantly, breadth—of *Meian* in that exploration of the human condition, despite its being unfinished.

First I shall summarize the main features of my appraisal of *Meian* in the aforementioned “Afterword.” I freely admit that I was largely following the distinguished Sōseki biographer and critic Komiya Toyotaka, under whom I had the great good fortune of studying at Gakushūin University during the winter semester of 1953–1954 in a seminar on *all* of Sōseki’s major novels, in his considering *Meian* as essentially a portrayal of the operation being performed on the soul of the protagonist Tsuda Yoshio before, during, and immediately after the operation performed on his body. In effect, Komiya views *Meian* as “a psychodrama of archetypal proportions,” to use the term the prominent Marxist literary critic Fredric Jameson uses in his ground-breaking essay “Sōseki and Western Modernism” in the journal *boundary 2* (Fall 1991).³ Of course, Jameson very pointedly does not view *Meian* in that way. In fact, he turns 180 degrees to focus on the novel’s form rather than its content.

Although I have the greatest admiration for Jameson and other Sōseki critics, especially my former student William Ridgeway who completed his doctoral dissertation on the novels of Sōseki and analyzed *Meian* in depth,⁴ not to mention the multitudinous Japanese critics of Sōseki who similarly differ from Komiya in their interpretation, I still think Komiya’s assessment is basically sound and has proved to be amazingly fruitful during the many decades since he first presented it, shortly after Sōseki’s death, even if one finds fault, as do I, with the particulars of that presentation. For, without that interpretation the *Meian* critic is left with the conundrum of what to make of the specifics of Tsuda’s physical illness. Without some sort of metaphorical treatment of his illness, that aspect of the novel becomes almost trivial and even preposterous, and the slightest contact with Sōseki’s work will convince readers that Sōseki may be many things, but one thing he is *not*, and that is trivial. Significantly, even a critic such as Ridgeway, who does not accept the Komiya/Viglielmo view of the novel *in toto*, does see Tsuda’s illness, an anal

³ Fredric Jameson, “Sōseki and Western Modernism,” *boundary 2*, 18 (Fall 1991), p. 126. My appreciation of Jameson’s essay is almost boundless, since his eminence as a literary critic enhances the importance of his evaluation of the novel. He used my translation for his study since he does not read Japanese.

⁴ His revised dissertation has been published as *A Critical Study of the Novels of Natsume Sōseki, 1867–1916*, Lewiston, New York: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2004.

fistula, which is somewhat like a fissure, as pointing to the manifold fissures in the relationships among the major characters. In fact, although Komiya is not alive to assess Ridgeway's treatment, I think I may speak for him by saying that he would not object to Ridgeway's metaphorical interpretation of Tsuda's physical fissure.

To repeat, in my 1960/1967 "Afterword" and now again I follow the broad outlines of Komiya's interpretation. But now, I wish to do what I did not do in my "Afterword," that is to give my reasons for accepting Komiya's view. For an additional half-century of study of Sōseki has only confirmed my belief that his principal concern in both his life and his work was the "fallen condition" of human beings, which he characterized as one of egoism, often using the English term. Indeed his forthright statement *Ningen wa egoizumu no katamari ni suginai* 人間はエゴイズムのかたまりにすぎない ("A human being is nothing more than a lump of egoism") strikes me as more powerful, albeit obviously much more pessimistic, than the exhaustively—and even exhaustingly—discussed motto he developed in his later years *sokuten kyoshi* 則天去私 ("to model oneself after Heaven and to depart from the self"), which clearly represents the prescription for overcoming one's "lump of egoism." And perhaps here is where I have come to differ somewhat from Komiya and major critics such as Okazaki Yoshie, whom I also had the good fortune of coming to know well, by translating his near-encyclopedic study of Japanese literature in the Meiji era (1868–1912). Both men—and many, many other Japanese critics since their time—have focused on the four-character Chinese term and have used it as a virtual code, or "open-sesame," for unraveling all of Sōseki's work, sometimes going so far as to count the number of times the character "Heaven" (*ten* 天) appears and analyzing its every use. In fact, I myself was somewhat guilty of this practice in my doctoral dissertation "The Later Natsume Sōseki: His Art and Thought" (Harvard, 1955). But now I wish to mend my ways and repudiate such mechanical use of the incantatory term *sokuten kyoshi*. In so doing, however, I in no way repudiate my emphasis on the concept of egoism, clearly discernible throughout Sōseki's work, and especially in the novels after *Mon* 門 (The Gate, 1910) and in his correspondence and recorded conversations after his "great illness" at Shuzenji, or the *Shuzenji taikan* 修善寺大患, in the same year, 1910.

The major problem for the *Meian* critic, however, is to determine *how* Sōseki treated the problem of egoism. For it must be clearly stated: *Meian* is *not* a philosophical or religious disquisition. Rather, it is manifestly a work of consummate artistry, and any attempt to reduce it to a kind of intellectual

treatise on egoism does great disservice to Sōseki and to the novel itself. And again I must do penance for a major aspect of my "Afterword," where I imposed a fixed structure or schema of stages of egoism on the novel, seeing the six major characters as constituting a moral hierarchy from "darkness" to "light" depending on the degree of egoism they manifest. By so doing, I was guilty of implying that these characters are static and quasi-allegorical figures—indeed virtual puppets—in a morality play. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. For certainly five of the six characters I treated, Tsuda the protagonist, O-Nobu, his wife, who occupies almost as important a position in the novel as her husband, Mrs. Yoshikawa, the wife of the president of the company where Tsuda works, O-Hide, Tsuda's younger sister, and Kobayashi, Tsuda's "friend" from schooldays, are exceedingly complex, and readers see many different facets of their personalities as the action of the novel progresses. Only Kiyoko, Tsuda's former fiancée, remains enigmatic because she appears only at the "end" of the novel, and yet she too is not merely the embodiment of selflessness, as I implied. There remains the unresolved problem of the nature of Kiyoko's relationship with Tsuda under the aegis of Mrs. Yoshikawa and the reason she suddenly jilted him to marry Seki shortly thereafter.

But, by now renouncing my rigid schema of a moral hierarchy, I do not mean that there are no salient differences among these six principal characters in the nature and degree of their egoism which need to be addressed to make sense of the novel and to ascertain how Sōseki is going about showing the face of egoism, or at least the Japanese face of egoism in the early Taishō Period (1912–1926). Moreover, I now must amplify my "Afterword" treatment of egoism by showing how Sōseki brilliantly reveals the nature of the early Taishō world of Japanese capitalism and the roles played by the members of the different classes. This is precisely where *Meian* excels all the other Sōseki novels, even the early *Gubijinsō* 虞美人草 (The Poppy, 1907), which admittedly also has a broad canvas. For *Meian* is as much a social as it is a psychological novel. Consider for a moment the vast social distance existing between, on the one hand, the faceless and nameless rickshaw-pullers and the servants of the different families depicted, such as the nameless ones serving the upper-class Yoshikawa and Okamoto families and others who are actually named and have a personality, such as O-Toki, the lone Tsuda maid living in her tiny two-mat room, and O-Kin, Kobayashi's sister serving the middle-class Fujiis, and, on the other hand, the "movers and shakers" of Taishō capitalism, preeminently Yoshikawa, smoking his expensive cigars in his

executive office and presiding masterfully over his domain, the semi-retired Okamoto playing at gardener and architect, and the never-seen but frequently-heard-from elder Tsuda, who, after a life of government service, retires in Kyoto and presumably lives off his pension, dividends, and rents. As in Henry James's novels, money is an omnipresent factor for those who have too much, for those who do not have enough, and, most assuredly, for those who have little or none. They interact in a variety of ways and exhibit egoism and occasionally altruism as the money and the things, such as a brilliant *obi* or a glittering ring or a new three-piece suit, or pleasures, such as the theater or a hot spring visit, which money can buy, appear and recede in accordance with the plot. Hence egoism, as defined by Sōseki, is not some abstract entity divorced from the workings of society but rather is painfully concrete and inextricably involved in everyday life. In my earlier critical essay, I have already praised the climactic hospital scene where O-Hide, Tsuda's sister, brings money to give her needy brother but is cruelly rebuffed by him and especially by her sister-in-law, who uses a check given to her by her wealthy uncle, Okamoto, to repel O-Hide's kindness. Here is the pertinent sentence: "That such a commonplace event as a money matter between sister and brother should have been exalted and transformed into a piercing flash of insight into the soul of man, that his baseness and ugliness should have been so brilliantly exposed, represent the triumph of Sōseki's psychological method, and indeed of his entire literary art."⁵ Of course in the main I stand by that statement and see no reason to retract it, but I am pained to note now that that sentence seems to imply that a commonplace event *needs* to be "exalted and transformed" to provide that "piercing flash of insight" and that without such exaltation and transformation it is fated to remain flat and dull, whereas this is not the case at all. In fact, Sōseki does not in any way exalt or transform the event. He simply presents it with deadly accuracy, and it is the readers who are "exalted and transformed" in their understanding of egoism by Sōseki's unerring eye for human weakness.

Here too I must differ from the previously mentioned Jameson, who, in his penetrating essay, contends that in *Meian* "money becomes 'humanized' and 'spiritualized' by passing into the conversation of people still bedeviled by it."⁶ Yet, in the just-described episode, both the money O-Hide offers Tsuda and the check O-Nobu produces dramatically from her *obi* do not seem to be

⁵ "Afterword," pp. 393-4.

⁶ Jameson, p. 141.

“humanized” or “spiritualized” in the slightest. On the contrary, O-Hide’s money, by being spurned by O-Nobu, and indirectly by Tsuda as well, is transformed into worthless trash, and O-Nobu’s check as well, far from being “spiritualized,” becomes a sharp-edged weapon to wound her sister-in-law cruelly.

Several other episodes in the novel also reveal the corrupting aspect of money. When Okamoto gives his niece O-Nobu a check after having teased her, he says to her: “‘This is a reparation for having made you cry earlier, O-Nobu. . . . this is the most effective medicine. In most cases, if you just take one dose, it quickly restores you to health. In fact, no matter how things go, this is an infallible remedy (*myōyaku* 妙薬).’” (76)⁷ But this check is the very check which, as we have seen, O-Nobu uses to rebuff O-Hide’s kindness. And she compounds her “crime” by later lying to Tsuda in saying that she purposely asked her uncle for it so as to help her husband whereas it was given to her without her asking for it. Hence readers quickly perceive that money, far from being an “infallible remedy,” can actually poison one’s ethical nature. Yet another episode where money is far from “spiritualized” takes place at the elegant French restaurant to which Tsuda invites Kobayashi, ostensibly for a farewell party before the latter leaves for Korea. He gives Kobayashi three ten-yen notes, apparently out of kindness, but readers know that he is doing so to buy Kobayashi’s silence about Tsuda’s past and bribe him so as not to have him meddle further in his affairs. The wily Kobayashi has already seen through Tsuda’s deceitful behavior and proceeds to give him an object lesson in genuine charity. For later in the evening he offers all three of the notes to Hara, a young artist friend of his who arrives at the restaurant in accordance with a pre-arranged plan. Tsuda, of course, is outraged but can do nothing. One might justifiably make the interpretation that, at this point, money becomes an instrument of teaching someone a lesson in morality and hence that it *is* somewhat “spiritualized,” but Sōseki has not yet concluded his treatment of the corrupting nature of money in this instance. For Hara has a strange glint in his eyes as he stares at the notes Kobayashi has lined up on the table. To quote the novel directly: “In this glint dwelt amazement and pleasure. There dwelt also a kind of hunger as well as the force of the desire to pounce on them.” (166)⁸ It is as if Sōseki must quickly eliminate any positive function of money lest readers actually believe that it could become

⁷ *Light and Darkness*, pp. 137–8.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 325.

Okamoto's "infallible remedy." With great effort Hara does restrain himself from pouncing upon the ten-yen notes, and ultimately Kobayashi is the one who gives him one of them.

Another important aspect of the novel is that it demonstrates the extraordinary difficulty human beings have in overcoming their egocentricity as well as the possibility of someone's changing for the better shortly after a particularly prominent display of such egocentricity. One of the revealing episodes in this regard is that of the truly startling reversal of roles between O-Nobu and O-Hide when the former visits the latter's home on the day after their dramatic conflict at the hospital. Readers might reasonably expect that O-Nobu will achieve another victory over O-Hide and that O-Hide will again display the benevolence shown at the hospital, but such is not the case. O-Nobu wants desperately to learn about the woman she believes has stolen Tsuda's affection, and she knows that his sister knows who that person is, as indeed she actually does. As a tactic, therefore, O-Nobu lowers herself to ask O-Hide to tell her everything. She even places her hands on her lap in front of O-Hide and actually bows her head. Amazingly, she cries out: "'Hideko, please be honest with me and don't hold anything back. . . . See how *I'm* being honest with *you*. See how I've repented for what I've done.'" (129)⁹ To put the finishing touch on this astounding performance, Sōseki adds: ". . . tears fell from her narrow eyes to her lap."

Although, in the light of O-Nobu's character as presented up to that point, readers may justifiably doubt the sincerity of her repentance, her behavior surely presents a dramatically different O-Nobu, one who is capable of at least *feigning* repentance.

But the turn-about in roles becomes virtually uncanny when O-Hide, although appealed to in this extraordinarily emotional way, vehemently rejects O-Nobu's request and instead says, enigmatically as far as O-Nobu is concerned, that she has never done O-Nobu any wrong and that she has had only goodwill toward both her brother and sister-in-law.

It is clear that the sub-text of O-Hide's response is that she will not lift a finger to enlighten O-Nobu about her brother's former fiancée and that thereby she is exacting her revenge for O-Nobu's cruel treatment of her the day before. O-Hide also purposely conceals the fact that she has gone that very morning to see Mrs. Yoshikawa and enlist her aid in combating O-Nobu. That conversation is not given directly in the text, but readers learn of it when Mrs. Yoshikawa tells Tsuda about it during her visit to the hospital.

⁹ Ibid., p. 244.

What Sōseki has achieved in depicting this battle of wills between two sisters-in-law is truly remarkable. In some respects, it is even more remarkable than the episode of the quarrel at the hospital which I praised in my previous essay and which many other critics, including even Jameson, see as central to the novel. For Sōseki has here succeeded in demonstrating the complexity—indeed the mystery—of human behavior. It is almost as if he is saying that there are both an angel and a demon battling in every human heart, and the person who is the site of the battle never knows which of the two will prevail at any given moment. For in less than twenty-four hours the cruelly triumphant O-Nobu of the hospital scene becomes the tearful penitent (even allowing for a certain amount of play-acting on her part) at O-Hide's home, whereas O-Hide, who at the hospital has genuinely wished to help her brother financially but who in the process is insulted to the depths of her being by her sister-in-law, becomes a vindictive woman who delights in her sister-in-law's discomfiture. Hence, I do not think that Sōseki wants readers to think of the O-Nobu/O-Hide encounter at the latter's home as simply an evening of the score between the two women but rather that he is saying that life presents an almost unending series of moral choices, where even the best of us can fall and even the worst of us can somehow be at least temporarily redeemed.

But now I come to the crux of the matter: Did Sōseki see any end to human beings' constant struggle between good and evil, or light and darkness, to use the title of the novel in the conventional sense of light representing the good and darkness representing evil? In my previous essay, I ventured a resolution of this question by pointing to Sōseki's development of the character of Kiyoko, who appears to embody the naturalness, calm, serenity, and, yes, even purity—as the Chinese character for her name clearly indicates—that would constitute a state of blessedness, one beyond egoism and yet still attainable by human beings. I even went so far as to state: "I feel that in many ways she [Kiyoko] holds the key to the entire novel and even more to the entire art and thought of Natsume Sōseki."¹⁰ The aforementioned Ridgeway took me to task for this statement by contending that in effect this was too great a weight to be placed on one character. I now recognize the accuracy of his criticism, and I readily admit that I allowed myself to make such an exaggeration largely for the sake of providing a literary flourish to the end of my essay. Indeed, as I have stated elsewhere, I now have revised somewhat my view of Kiyoko and do not see her as necessarily the ideal figure who is the polar opposite of Tsuda the arch-egoist. I do not "demote" her, but she has become much more of a question mark for me.

¹⁰ "Afterword," p. 396.

Instead, over the many years that I have wrestled with this novel, and not merely as I was translating it, it is the figure of Kobayashi who has come increasingly to captivate me. Perhaps it is that the complexity and ambiguity of old age have made the complex and ambiguous Kobayashi more congenial to me than the apparent simplicity and one-dimensionality of Kiyoko, who appealed to me in my youth. Also, I cannot but think that the extraordinary care that Sōseki has taken to develop this utterly original character tells us more about Sōseki's art and thought than the admittedly beautiful, serene, and possibly salvific, or Beatrice-like, figure of Kiyoko. Moreover, readers learn, already in Section 3, that the name of Tsuda's doctor is Kobayashi, even before Kobayashi the important character is introduced in Section 26, and this fact is mentioned again in Section 29. As I translated the novel, I paid scant attention to this name duplication, and indeed I have seen very few references to this fact in the vast critical literature on this novel. It was only much later that I began to ponder the significance of this fact and became convinced that it was not at all a minor element in the plot. I even came to think that Sōseki had very deliberately inserted this seemingly trivial fact—after all, Kobayashi is a rather common Japanese surname—to lure readers into doing exactly what I was then doing, namely wondering about its significance. But it was really after I had developed a theory about the role of Kobayashi in the novel that I became convinced that Sōseki, by this device, was obliquely but cleverly saying that Kobayashi, the incorrigible and exasperating “friend” of Tsuda, is the doctor who principally performs the true operation on Tsuda's soul. This interpretation not only has considerable justification in terms of the structure of *Meian*, but also conforms to Sōseki's penchant, apparent elsewhere in his work, for challenging conventional wisdom and overturning conventional values. Two examples from his early work come to mind: the nameless cat in his comic masterpiece *Wagahai wa neko de aru* 吾輩は猫である (I Am a Cat, 1905–1906) is forever puncturing Kushami-sensei's foibles, and the picaresque Botchan in the novella with that title (*Botchan* 坊ちゃん, 1906) also overturns the established order at the middle school in Shikoku where he is teaching. But of course Kobayashi's role in *Meian* is basically not at all a comic one, despite the fact that he often behaves in a clownish fashion. His serious intent is apparent from his first appearance in the novel. In fact, even before Tsuda sees Kobayashi at his Uncle Fujii's home he *hears* him talking with his uncle in the parlor but does not recognize his voice because Kobayashi is talking *seriously* about his sister's forthcoming marriage. (26) I think that this episode foreshadows the essentially serious role Kobayashi

will play in Tsuda's and O-Nobu's lives, which neither wishes to recognize at first. And indeed at times Kobayashi plays the role of the Holy Fool, whose comic exterior conceals his true spiritual nature.

Sōseki's genius at characterization is perhaps nowhere better shown than in his creation of Kobayashi. For it is so easy to miss the brilliance of both Kobayashi's actions and words because of his clownishness and indeed frequently outright boorishness. Even as astute a critic as Jameson fails to see the positive and genuinely liberating aspects of Kobayashi's words and actions and instead sees only his "lower-class shabbiness and willful psychic ugliness," focusing selectively on Kobayashi's comments to O-Nobu: "'Mrs. Tsuda, I live to be disliked. I purposely say and do things people don't like.'" (85)¹¹ Ridgeway also does not recognize the ethical stature of Kobayashi, since he contends that Kobayashi too participates in terrorizing Tsuda and O-Nobu (which of course he *is* guilty of), but, in criticizing Kobayashi in this way, Ridgeway erroneously equates such "terrorizing" with that of those in positions of wealth and power.

Kobayashi's role in the novel unfolds primarily in a series of encounters with Tsuda and one encounter of extraordinary importance with O-Nobu which I shall later discuss in detail. Only a careful reading of the novel will reveal how Sōseki builds the character of Kobayashi to the point where he (Kobayashi) has become the voice of a higher morality, the proponent of a world-view that challenges the preconceptions and values of Tsuda's and O-Nobu's closed and smug upper-middle-class urban world. And yet Sōseki rarely has Kobayashi articulating this higher morality by set speeches or clear-cut imperatives but rather has him interacting with Tsuda and O-Nobu in such a way that they, almost despite themselves, must recognize his overturning of their values and admit that he has penetrated their formidable armor. Of course they do not surrender to him, but they are both so shaken by him that they can never again assert their social superiority over him with the force of their previous conviction. In the case of Tsuda, as we shall see, Kobayashi even invades his subconscious mind, to challenge him from within.

The manner in which Sōseki intrudes this alien element, i.e., Kobayashi's personality, almost like a virus, into the lives of the young married couple is masterful. He is referred to as an old school friend of Tsuda, but elsewhere Tsuda comments that Kobayashi has not had a proper education so that we must conclude that they were school friends at an earlier stage than university,

¹¹ Jameson, p. 128.

probably higher school (*kōtōgakkō* 高等学校). Nevertheless, Kobayashi is educated sufficiently to have become a kind of editor of the journal Tsuda's Uncle Fujii is producing. Kobayashi is also shown to be much better read than Tsuda, who prides himself on continuing to develop himself intellectually long after graduation from the university. Kobayashi's interpretation of Dostoyevsky's works, during his conversation with Tsuda at the cheap restaurant on the evening before Tsuda's hospitalization, reveals both his compassion for the poor and the sharp contrast with Tsuda, who admits he has never read any Russian literature. Moreover, at the French restaurant during his third encounter with Tsuda he discusses modern art with Hara, and thereby annoys Tsuda considerably as the latter is convinced that the two men are attempting to shame him by exhibiting their greater knowledge of art.

And yet it is certainly not that Kobayashi uses his superior intellect to overturn Tsuda's values. Rather, he challenges those values directly in a variety of ways, often actually pretending ignorance of social distinctions or an inability to discern differences between French and British cuisine so as to unnerve Tsuda and make him aware of his own radically different world-view.

The three encounters between Kobayashi and Tsuda virtually constitute three acts in a two-man drama, although there are other players in the first and third encounters. Sōseki pits the non-conformist and quasi-revolutionary Kobayashi against the arch-conformist Tsuda in a vigorous verbal tug-of-war to create some of the most fascinating—and even exciting—dialogues in modern Japanese literature. Thus he *shows* readers the nature of the two men rather than *tells* them about it. At first, Tsuda's superior social and economic situation seems to give the advantage to him, but that very advantage is used against him by his crafty adversary. Kobayashi knows the weak points in Tsuda's character and succeeds in touching every one of them. He also knows that, whereas he is so down-and-out he has nothing to lose, Tsuda is in precisely the opposite position. During his second encounter with Tsuda, in the latter's hospital room, he articulates his position in almost exactly those words: "Take me, for instance. I'm the sort of fellow that it doesn't matter who I quarrel with. I'm so down-and-out already I can't lose a thing no matter who I fight with. In fact if anything comes of the fight at all it certainly won't be any loss to me, because I've never had a thing to lose in the first place. . . . But *you're* different. *Your* quarrels could never possibly be of any use to you.'" (119)¹²

¹² *Light and Darkness*, p. 223.

And yet however much Kobayashi is able to turn the tables on Tsuda, he still cannot be said to have gained the final victory over him. For, if he has nothing to lose from a fight with Tsuda, he does have something to gain, which is precisely *not* a victory. He is shown to be an extraordinarily lonely person. During the first encounter, upon leaving the cheap restaurant Kobayashi has compelled Tsuda to drink with him at, he indicates to Tsuda that he does not really want to go to Korea, whereupon Tsuda states: “‘Well then, why don’t you give it up?’” Then Sōseki, as he does throughout the novel when he wants to drive home a particular point that he thinks readers may not fully grasp merely from the dialogue, stops the exchange to comment on it: “To the extent that Tsuda’s words contained a logic self-evident to anyone, they were the equivalent of cruelly wounding his companion, who seemed to be starving for sympathy.” Sōseki concludes that paragraph of narrative by adding: “After going on a few steps, Kobayashi suddenly turned to him: ‘Tsuda, I’m very lonely.’” (37)¹³

The following paragraph of narrative is beautifully representative of the way Sōseki develops his novel, because he moves from commenting on the inner life of his characters, in this case Kobayashi, to giving a description of the surroundings where the conversation between the two men has been taking place:

Tsuda did not respond. The two continued walking silently. As the trickle of water flowing in the middle of the shallow river-bed disappeared darkly underneath the dimly seen bridge it murmured faintly in the intervals between the noise of passing streetcars. (37)¹⁴

Here, we see Sōseki expounding his basic theme of egoism by metaphorically depicting the alienation and isolation egoism engenders. Tsuda’s lack of response to Kobayashi’s heartfelt cry for companionship ironically speaks volumes about Tsuda’s spiritual state, and the description of the physical surroundings echoes that painful moment of a breach in human community. In the time-honored fashion of Japanese literature, in both poetry and prose, nature, even in an urban setting, reflects the human situation. Let us examine the important sentence again, underscoring the terms that may readily be understood as metaphorical: “As the *trickle of water* flowing in the middle of

¹³ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 62–63.

the *shallow river-bed disappeared darkly* underneath the *dimly seen bridge* it *murmured faintly* in the intervals between the *noise of passing streetcars*.” A half a dozen negative and disturbing words, *trickle, shallow, darkly, dimly, faintly*, and *noise*, eloquently convey the pathos of two human beings who cannot communicate meaningfully with each other. There is no human voice whatsoever, and even the natural sound of the water is almost drowned out by the mechanical noise of streetcars.

To return to the discussion of Kobayashi, we see that he fails to establish a friendship with Tsuda, and he is left with the task of exposing the character of the man who rebuffs him. Perhaps the passage where he exposes Tsuda’s character most brilliantly comes during his third encounter at the French restaurant where Kobayashi has Tsuda read a letter Kobayashi has received from an impoverished youth who has become virtually an indentured servant at the youth’s cruel and deceitful uncle’s home and who relates in considerable detail his painful experiences there. Tsuda reads the letter and, surprisingly, is actually moved “to discover an existence utterly different from his own.” Moreover, “he began to feel that this person too was after all a human being.” (165)¹⁵ Therefore, when Kobayashi asks, after Tsuda has read the letter, whether he feels any sympathy for the writer, Tsuda responds: “‘Naturally I do.’” Kobayashi’s rejoinder is a perfect example of the “Kobayashi method” of unnerving Tsuda and thereby also a perfect example of the “Sōseki method” of his skewering his characters in his relentless exposure of their innate selfishness. The passage is worthy of being quoted completely:

“That’s enough, as far as I’m concerned. If you feel sympathy that means in effect you want to give him money. At the same time since you actually don’t want to give any money you’re feeling the uneasiness that comes from a conflict of conscience. My goal has been more than attained at that point.” (165)¹⁶

The description of the Kobayashi-Tsuda relationship ends at this point, with the previously mentioned episode of Kobayashi’s giving Hara one of the ten-yen notes he has just received from Tsuda. Tsuda stifles his chagrin and embarrassment at this development as well as his clear sense of defeat at Kobayashi’s clever stroke “to provide at least a formally correct conclusion

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 322.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 324.

to the unharmonious gathering of the three of them there that evening.” (166)¹⁷

The pivotal Section 167 clearly marks a significant break in the narrative, since it marks the formal departure from the novel not only of Kobayashi but also of O-Nobu, as well as begins the account of Tsuda's trip to the hot spring, ostensibly to recuperate from his operation but actually to have a meeting with his former fiancée, Kiyoko, who, Mrs. Yoshikawa has informed him, is there recovering from a miscarriage.

A truly thorough analysis of the novel would surely require a close examination of the last twenty-two sections (167–188), but since I have already treated them, albeit rather sketchily, in an earlier essay in this journal,¹⁸ I shall pass over these admittedly significant passages treating Tsuda's meeting with Kiyoko to focus only on the passage in Section 181, previously alluded to, treating what I have termed “the fourth encounter” between Tsuda and Kobayashi. (Parenthetically, I cannot but be amazed at the fact that these highly important—indeed perhaps critically important—twenty-two sections should correspond precisely to those sections which I mentioned in the first sentence of this essay as remaining after Sōseki had collapsed over his desk on November 22, 1916, when he was about to begin writing Section 189. For if *Meian* had been broken off with Section 166, the novel, although it might still have been considered an important one, would surely not have been considered his major work. As it is, however, many—in fact almost all—of the *Meian* critics agree that, although incomplete, it can with considerable justification be viewed as a finished work of art. Interestingly, both Jameson and Ridgeway go so far as to consider *Meian*'s incompleteness to be a virtue, with the latter going even further by terming the novel “a postmodern masterpiece.”)¹⁹

The “fourth encounter” occurs on the morning after Tsuda's first night at the hot spring inn. As he is writing post cards to O-Nobu and other close relatives, he ponders the possibility of sending one to Kobayashi, too. But his imagination carries him off, to the point of fantasizing that Kobayashi, upon receiving the post card, would quickly arrive at the inn and storm into Tsuda's room. He even imagines the following exchange:

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 326.

¹⁸ *The Eastern Buddhist* 8, no. 2 (October 1975): pp. 144–53.

¹⁹ Ridgeway, p. 40.

“What the devil did you come here for?”

“For nothing in particular. Just to annoy you.”

“But for what reason?”

“Why in the world do I have to have a reason! As long as you dislike me, I’ll simply hound you forever no matter where you go.”

“Damn you!”

Thereupon Sōseki shifts to the third-person to add:

He would suddenly feel compelled to clench his fist and punch Kobayashi in the nose. Instead of defending himself, Kobayashi would immediately fall flat on his back in the center of the room with his arms and legs outstretched.

Then Sōseki gives us Kobayashi’s verbal reaction:

“You hit me, you wretch! All right, have it your way!” (181)²⁰

The imaginary “riotous scene” causes Tsuda to shudder and come to himself. The interpretation that almost all readers would make is that Sōseki wished to emphasize the fact that Kobayashi had finally penetrated Tsuda’s subconscious and that Tsuda would have to contend with Kobayashi even if he were not actually in Japan. Hence, in a sense, Kobayashi has actually triumphed over Tsuda by becoming a tenant in Tsuda’s mind. For me, this semi-comical fantasy encounter takes on great significance, confirming Kobayashi’s role as the *genuine* Dr. Kobayashi vis-à-vis the man with the same surname who performs the physical operation on Tsuda’s body.

In conclusion, I wish to treat the passage in the novel that challenges me the most in assessing it and its place in the over-all structure of the work. Moreover, this passage provides the most conspicuous example in the novel of Sōseki’s treating religion directly and utterly unambiguously. For one relatively brief moment, Sōseki has a character articulate a view of the world and of the place of human beings in that world that is breathtaking in its implications. Although I have read innumerable critiques of the novel in both Japanese and English—and even the one in French that is appended to the previously-cited translation—to the best of my recollection I have not encountered a careful treatment of this passage and its implications. Nor did I attempt to treat it heretofore myself, even obliquely, in anything I have ever written on Sōseki.

²⁰ *Light and Darkness*, p. 359.

This challenging passage is primarily a colloquy between Kobayashi and O-Nobu that constitutes a portion of one of the most engrossing episodes in the novel. On the night of Tsuda's first encounter with Kobayashi, the latter asks him if he may have Tsuda's old overcoat that he wore during his school-days, whereupon Tsuda readily agrees to give it to him. After Tsuda enters the hospital to undergo his operation, Kobayashi stops by at the Tsuda home and asks O-Nobu, who is alone at the time, to give him the promised overcoat. Before she does, however, the two have a fairly lengthy conversation that disturbs O-Nobu greatly. Kobayashi's psychological state reveals an utterly different world to her, one of a man who is capable of saying, as I have previously indicated in referring to Jameson's assessment of Kobayashi, that he actually tries to be disliked. The next section of the novel, Section 86, is almost entirely taken up by Sōseki's treating O-Nobu's reaction to this strange man's words and behavior as well as the conversation where she voices her distress and he responds to her probing questions. I quote the pertinent parts of that section:

O-Nobu became completely confused in the presence of this strange man. First of all, she did not really understand him. Second, she felt no sympathy whatever for him. And third, she doubted his sincerity. Hostility, fear, disdain, distrust, ridicule, hatred, curiosity—she was certainly unable to bring together these various feelings, which mingled confusedly in her brain. Consequently they merely made her uneasy. She finally asked him:

"Do you mean to say then that you admit you came here purposely to annoy me?"

"Oh no, that wasn't my purpose. I came here to get the overcoat."

"But are you saying that while you came to get the overcoat you also came to annoy me?"

"No, that's not it either. I came without the slightest ulterior motive. I think I'm much less calculating than you are, Mrs. Tsuda."

"Be that as it may, won't you please answer the question directly?"

"All right, that's why I said I came here perfectly naturally, without any ulterior motive. It's merely that as a natural result I seem to have been able to annoy you."

"In other words, that was your objective, wasn't it?"

"No, it wasn't. But it may have been my basic desire."

"What's the difference between your objective and your basic desire?"

“You mean you don’t think there is any?”

Hatred flashed from O-Nobu’s narrow eyes. They clearly warned him that he had better not try to make a fool of her just because she was a woman.

“You mustn’t get angry,” Kobayashi said. “I’ve merely tried to explain to you that I haven’t been trying to get revenge on you from some petty motive. I said that purposely because I wanted you to understand I can’t help it if God has made me the kind of person I am and has ordered me to go and annoy people. I’d like you to realize I don’t have any bad intentions at all. I’d like you to know that from the outset I’ve been completely without purpose. But God may perhaps have one. And for His purpose He may be using me. And maybe my basic desire is to be used by Him.”

Kobayashi’s statement was a trifle too confused. But O-Nobu did not have the necessary intellect to probe the holes in his logic. Nor did she have mental faculties sufficiently organized to determine whether she should accept his statement unconditionally or not. And yet she certainly was clever enough to grasp the main point of his argument. She quickly summed up Kobayashi’s aim in a few words.

“Well then, you mean that as far as annoying people is concerned, you can annoy them as much as you like but that you don’t in any way accept the responsibility for your actions.”

“Yes, that’s precisely it. That’s my main point.” (86)²¹

Before presenting my commentary on this passage, I must explain that the Japanese word I have translated as “God” is *ten*, meaning “Heaven,” in the text, not *kami* 神 or *kami-sama* 神様, the usual word for “God” in Japanese. However, I certainly did not use the word “God” for *ten* because I wished to Christianize the term, but because it seemed more appropriate here, and I also thought it made for smoother English.

Setting aside this language problem, what are we to make of this passage? It is a simple matter to dismiss it as merely constituting Kobayashi’s playful baiting of O-Nobu and hence as constituting a whimsical passage that displays Sōseki’s rhetorical skill. The paragraph following the heated exchange between O-Nobu and Kobayashi, wherein Sōseki or the narrator disparages

²¹ Ibid., pp. 155–6.

Kobayashi's statement about God's, or Heaven's, purpose would seem, at first reading, to support such an interpretation, were it not for the fact that Sōseki, in so many other places in his work, has a character make a bold or controversial statement only to have the narrator undercut it sharply immediately thereafter. This device is the equivalent of a gambler cleverly "palm-ing his ace." Hence I cannot dismiss the passage so easily, for I cannot but think that Sōseki is here revealing his own speculation on the possibility of—and perhaps even his belief in—a Grand Design, with a capital G and a capital D, in human affairs. By having Kobayashi suggest a purpose that God, or Heaven, may have and by having Kobayashi say that his "basic desire," as opposed to his "objective" of obtaining Tsuda's used overcoat, may be to be used by God, or Heaven, Sōseki, at a stroke, introduces a profoundly religious perspective that until that point has only been implicit but not explicit in his novels. In the works prior to *Meian*, especially in *Kōjin* and *Kokoro*, mentioned earlier, Sōseki does indeed wrestle with religious problems but, interestingly, does not introduce teleology. "Heaven" (*ten*) and "nature" (*shizen* 自然) are at times variously conceived as having a role in human affairs, and the specific term "religion" (*shūkyō* 宗教) is famously invoked by Ichirō, the protagonist of *Kōjin*, as the third of the three possible roads open to him, with "death" and "madness" being the other two, but until this particular passage in *Meian* Sōseki does not suggest, or rather have a character suggest, that human beings' deepest instincts (here expressed by Kobayashi's use of the word *honmō* 本望, which I have translated as "basic desire") are to be used by "Heaven" for its "purpose" (*mokuteki* 目的). Although this may seem to be merely a minor semantic matter, I see Sōseki's use of the word *mokuteki* here as truly significant. For it is in fact the precise term that is used to make up the Sino-Japanese word for "teleology" (*mokutekiron* 目的論), literally "the [philosophical] treatment of 'purpose.'" Moreover, the linking of *ten* with *mokuteki* in the key sentence in the original Japanese, *Shikashi ten ni wa mokuteki ga aru ka mo shiremasen* しかし天には目的があるかもしれません ("However, Heaven may have a purpose"), goes one important step further than the term *sokuten*, in the aforementioned motto *sokuten kyoshi*, so loved and so minutely analyzed by the Komiya/Okazaki school of Japanese literary criticism. For *sokuten* refers to *human beings*' "modeling themselves on Heaven," but pointedly does *not* mean that *Heaven* has a *purpose* in human affairs. Thus, Sōseki shifts the emphasis in his treatment of religion here from *human* activity to *divine* activity—a major shift indeed! This discussion may seem to be much ado about nothing to those critics, such as Jameson, who

from the outset rule out any consideration of philosophical content. But, however much I admire Jameson's critical acumen and truly astonishing erudition, I cannot agree with him in this matter, for such dismissal closes off a reading that has been central to an understanding of Sōseki's work, and especially of *Meian*. His precise statement, which deserves complete quotation since it is representative of an important school of literary criticism, is: "In the dialectical analysis of literary form, then, such questions of philosophical content or message are either too much or too little; either they overshoot the formal mark by raising illicit questions about the meaning of life, or else they have not been sufficiently pursued to the point at which they become part of a more general social and historical inquiry into the period."²² I must emphasize that I cannot agree that questions about the meaning of life are automatically "illicit." For what I have tried to do in this essay is to show that Sōseki's meticulous and almost scientific analysis of human egoism in *Meian* opens up precisely those questions about the meaning of life that Jameson declares to be "off limits." My reading of *Meian* is that it is a far richer and a far more powerful novel for challenging readers to examine their own lives and to attempt to root out the egoism therein as well as to ponder the central philosophical or religious question of whether they are living and dying in an unfeeling universe or whether, like Kobayashi, their "basic desire" may in fact be to be used by God, or Heaven, for His, Her, or Its purpose.

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²² Jameson, p. 137.